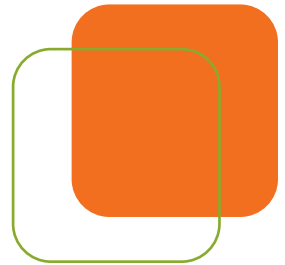




## RESOURCE BOOKLET ON EXCESSIVE INTERNET USE



1. Introduction	Pg 3
2. Looking Through the Youth's Eyes	Pg 4
3. Signs of Excessive Internet Use	Pg 4
4. Managing Internet Use	
<i>Behavioural Modification</i>	Pg 5
<i>Activity Scheduling</i>	Pg 8
<i>Internet To-Do list</i>	Pg 10
<i>Control of the Internet and Electronic Devices</i>	Pg 10
5. Tips for Parents and Caregivers	Pg 12
6. Crisis Management	Pg 14
7. Resources	Pg 15
8. Contact Us	Pg 15

This resource booklet is written to guide parents and caregivers as they play critical roles in helping youths manage their excessive Internet use.

Online technology is a cornerstone in the lives of many youths today. Its proliferation and pervasiveness make many youths vulnerable to problematic Internet use. Parents need to give their children proper guidance by helping them set boundaries and teaching them to use the Internet responsibly. More importantly, parents should guide their children to keep their priorities in check and maintain a healthy, balanced lifestyle.

This booklet will help you better understand why adolescents enjoy gaming and using the Internet. It will also provide you with guidelines and practical tips to help them manage excessive Internet use. At the end of this booklet, you will find useful information on where you can seek further assistance.



## Looking through the Youth's Eyes

Today's youths grow up in a "wired world" where many of them practically "live" online. It is important to note that the Internet is not necessarily bad for our children. For most of them, using the Internet and playing online games are enjoyable activities, and can even be beneficial in some ways. The problem arises when their Internet use becomes excessive, disruptive, or even develops into an addiction.



Adolescence is a challenging phase as youths seek to forge their own identities and develop important attachments with the people around them. Many youths interact with their friends through Internet activities such as online gaming and social media, and these are the means by which they seek to gain acceptance within a peer group.

It is crucial for parents to understand why their children are attracted to the Internet and how it benefits them. At the same time, they need to help them learn how to manage their time and be more responsible with their Internet use.

## Signs of Excessive Internet Use

Learning to recognise the signs of excessive Internet use is the first step towards helping our children use the Internet in a responsible and acceptable way. Here are some signs to take note of:

1. The child needs to spend an increasing amount of time gaming or using the Internet before he can achieve satisfaction.
2. The child becomes irritable or violent if he is not allowed to game or use the Internet.

3. The academic performance of the child is affected due to the excessive amounts of time spent gaming or using the Internet. He may also start to neglect his health and self-care.
4. Although the child recognises that his gaming or Internet use is problematic and has the intention to cut down or stop, he is unable to do so for a sustained period of time.
5. The child gives up attending social events (for example, going out with friends or having dinner with his family), or start replacing the hobbies that he once enjoyed with gaming or Internet use.

If your child shows some or all of the above signs, we encourage you to seek professional help.

## Managing Internet Use

### Behaviour Modification

Behaviour Modification is a form of therapy used to change problematic behaviours. It is based on the reinforcement of desired behaviours (operant conditioning). It can be easily implemented by following a few basic principles. It works on anybody regardless of age. It is important to note that for behaviour modification to be effective, it is essential to first establish a trusting and respectful relationship with your child. This is even more important when they are in their adolescence as this is a period of seeking independence in decision-making and establishing their own identity.

### Principles of Behaviour Modification

#### *Identify behaviours*

The first step is to identify the behaviour that you want the child to change. For example, it could be the excessive use of the computer/Internet or skipping school. For younger children, you may want to limit to one or two behaviour change(s) each time. For older children, three or four behaviour changes can be implemented each time.

You may want to have your child rank the behaviour changes in terms of the ease of implementation. Begin with the behaviour that he finds easiest to change. This will help your child achieve the changes, and as a result, increase his self-efficacy and confidence level. You can discuss with your child the changes you would like to see and the changes he is agreeable to make.

### Be specific

Be very specific about the desired behaviour that your child has agreed to work towards. Do not use broad terms like “Be good”. He may not grasp what constitutes “good” behaviour as it is too vague. Instead, use specific examples like “Study for one hour”, “Use the computer/Internet for only two hours on a weekday” or “Help with dishwashing after dinner”.

### Plan a reward

The reward must be attractive to the child to motivate him towards the desired behaviour. The reward should be inexpensive and non-excessive. Examples of suitable rewards are a special weekend outing, a meal out, extra pocket money or anything else which your child will be motivated by. For older children or youths, you may agree to allow him to have an outing with friends over the weekend.

Do not reward your child with the problem behaviour. For example, if the agreed limit for gaming is two hours a day, do not increase it to three hours as a reward for sticking to the agreement or for other commendable behaviours. By doing so, you will send confusing messages to your child. Instead, reward him with another incentive or privilege. Alternatively, if your child is unable to adhere to the agreed limits, gaming privileges may be withdrawn. In other words, the child loses his privilege to game or use the Internet for a specified period of time, until the desired behaviour has been carried out.

### Accountability

Tokens can be used for younger children. These tokens, which may be stickers, play money, or marbles, should preferably be attractive, easy to carry and dispense, and difficult to counterfeit. This may not work for older children as they may find it childish.

- Reward every behaviour change that the child has achieved, with a token or stamp.
- A limit should be set on the total number of tokens or stamps that can be given in a day per behaviour, for example one or two tokens for every behaviour. A system of exchanging the tokens or stamps for a reward should be agreed upon by both parents and the child. The number of tokens or stamps required to “redeem” a reward should be determined, and it should not be too low or too high. If it is too low, your child will find it too easy to get the reward and this will not help him to change his behaviour. If it is too high, your child may become easily discouraged.
- For older children or youths, the concept of affirming positive and desirable behaviours still applies. Thus, do make an effort to acknowledge the positive changes and let your child know that you do notice these behaviours through your encouragement and affirmation.

### Perseverance

It may be difficult for your child to achieve a complete change in behaviour in the first few weeks. Some children may respond immediately to this method while others may require more time. Persevere and the child’s behaviour will improve over time.

### Be consistent

When your child manages to accomplish change in the behaviour, you must also keep to your part of the bargain. Reward where appropriate. At the same time, if your child does not accomplish the behaviour, you must also carry out the consequence(s) as earlier agreed upon.

### Encourage your child to do the right things

It is often easy for us to spot a problematic behaviour and punish or discipline a child for it. However, it is more effective and important to affirm a positive and acceptable behaviour. Create more opportunities for affirmation by modifying your statements into “action” statements. For example, instead of saying “Stop gaming so much”, replace with “I would like you to keep to our agreed limit of two hours for play daily”. This enables you to affirm your child when it is done. For example “I am happy to see that you are able to limit your gaming/Internet use to two hours”.

### Behaviour Modification Chart

An example of a Behaviour Modification Chart is shown below. If you have a younger child, you can draw up and decorate this chart together with him. An older child may like this chart to be printed out so that it looks “official”. You may want to include a “signature” section for you and your child to sign on. This instills in him a sense of responsibility to keep to the agreed terms. It is important for us to consider the need to replace gaming or excessive Internet use with something that is beneficial, of value and entertaining to your child.

Child’s Name:							
Incentives:							
Behavioural Goals	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat	Sun
1)							
2)							
3)							
4)							

## Activity Scheduling

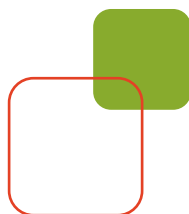
Activity scheduling is a tool that can be used to help your children prioritise their time and activities, introduce new activities into their current lifestyle and help them manage their time spent using the Internet more effectively. It provides predictability and consistency, while allowing advanced planning. It also promotes their independence in managing their time and daily activities.

For a start, you may want to schedule just one to three activities for the week, depending on the readiness of the child. Subsequently, with success and increased confidence, you can explore drawing up a more structured schedule.

Begin with more predictable activities such as “Meal”, “School”, “Shower” and so on, followed by suggested activities that you would like your child to engage in. Be prepared to play an active role in some of the activities by doing them with your child. This will encourage participation.

Depending on your agreement with your child and the agreed time limit, you may need to slot in gaming/Internet use as one of the activities as well. You could incorporate gaming/Internet use into a general activity like “Relaxation”. Time for “Relaxation” can be used to watch TV, play game, surf the Internet or any activity that your child wants to engage in.

Below is a template of an activity schedule that you may like to adapt for your own use. There are also examples of activities that you can slot in.



## Weekday Activity Schedule (School Term)

TIME/DAY	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI
7am – 1pm	School	School	School	School	School
1pm – 2pm	Leave for home; Lunch	Lunch	Leave for home; Lunch	Lunch	Leave for home; Lunch
2pm – 3pm		Co-curricular activity		<b>Homework and reading at the library</b>	Shower; Homework
3pm – 4pm					
4pm – 5pm					
5pm – 6pm		Leave for home; Shower		Leave for home; Shower	
6pm – 7pm				Dinner	
7pm – 8pm	Dinner	Dinner	Dinner	Tuition	<b>Dinner out with family</b>
8pm – 9pm	<b>Gaming</b>	<b>Help wash up after dinner</b>			
9pm – 10pm		TV time			
10pm – 11pm	Sleep	Sleep	Sleep	Sleep	Home and sleep

Apart from drawing up an Activity Schedule for the school term, you could ask your child to draw up schedules for the following periods:

- Weekend (School Term)
- Weekday (School Holidays)
- Weekend (School Holidays)

## Internet To-Do List

It is very easy for us to lose track of time when we are gaming or on the Internet. Thus, it may be useful to get your child to set up an Internet to-do list. Similar to a shopping list, the list helps the child prioritise tasks, and ensure that they do not go “off track” and use the Internet beyond the agreed time limit. Once your child has checked off all the tasks in the list, he should then log off from the computer.

A simple to-do list could look like this:

1. Check Facebook for updates
2. Check Twitter account
3. Blog for 20 minutes

We will have to also take into account the time limit agreed upon when setting up the to-do list, and there may be times when there can only be one thing on the to-do list. For example, if the time limit agreed upon is only 1.5 hours/day and your child wants to game online together with his friends at a specific time, which will usually take up an entire 1.5 hours, you will then have to remind your child on the time limit previously set and that only this activity can be on the to-do list for that day.

## Modelling

People, especially children, learn by example. One of the best ways to help your child use the Internet responsibly or reduce his time spent at gaming is for you to be a role model. If your child sees you using the Internet, talking on your phone or watching the television excessively, he will think that it is permissible to spend a great deal of time on such activities.

Make an effort to spend time with your child and engage him in family activities, such as having meals together, taking evening walks, playing board games, having conversations and even watching television together as you talk about the television show.

## Control of the Internet and Electronic Devices

The Internet is a vast domain with a huge storage of information. Information can be useful and constructive or dangerous and damaging. It is quite impossible to police the Internet although some forms of control are available.

## Internet Blocking/Filter Software

As a parent, you can do your part to keep out unwanted and undesirable websites from your home.

To ensure the security of our homes, we may install alarm systems. Likewise, there are “alarm systems” to protect our children from the undesirable content found on the Internet. These come in the form of parental control software like Internet Blocker Software and Program Access Control Software.

There are many types of parental control software available; some are free while others are not. Free wares usually perform basic functions of blocking access to undesirable sites. Paid wares may incur some monetary cost but they usually come with more advanced features.

Some features that good parental control software can provide include:

1. Customisable filtering levels for different individual users
2. Frequent updating of undesirable sites
3. Control over which programmes can be used by which user
4. Configurable predetermined time for online access. Some can even work on the basis of cumulative time allowances
5. Creation of custom messages that will be shown when time limits are reached
6. Creation of a log of webpages visited, time and length of visit

## Internet Service Provider

You can also install access points for Ethernet sockets in room(s) which you can limit access to. For example, you can install the access points in the master bedroom. If you have Wi-Fi router, have an agreement with your child that the router will be switched on and off at fixed times of the day.

Alternatively, if your child is accessing the Internet via his mobile data plan and has not been keeping to the agreement on Internet access, you may want to consider halting the mobile plan or limiting his phone to a basic phone model that can only be used for making calls and



sending SMS. Take note that other mobile devices like tablets and laptops may pose similar issues as a smart phone.

An initial agreement should first be established with the child on responsible Internet use and consequences for non-compliance should be clearly specified. Sudden removal of the Internet access can evoke drastic reactions from your child. Hence, implementations of the above measures and their related concerns can first be discussed with a counsellor.

The general consensus is not to refrain from Internet use entirely. Rather, the treatment goal is to enable the child to use the Internet responsibly. When your child has proven that he can use the Internet responsibly, you can gradually return the control of Internet use back to him.

## Tips for Parents & Caregivers

*“Raising a child is like holding a wet bar of soap — too firm a grasp and it shoots from your hand, too loose a grip and it slides away. A gentle but firm hold keeps you in control.”*

– R. Kent Hughes, *Disciplines of a Godly Man*

Imagine that it is late in the evening and your adolescent child wants to go out with some friends. Each time this happens, you ask yourself many questions: “Should I let him go? Did I make the right decision? What is happening out there? Are they using drugs or alcohol? Who are they mingling with?” Somehow, we do not feel safe. We know that if we were to say “no”, they will rebel against our control.

### 1. Understanding adolescents and their world

Very often, we as parents forget what it is like to be an adolescent. We forget that adolescents want to be close to their peers and partake in what they do. For example, when we were young, we spent hours in the basketball court, but now we expect our children to engage in online gaming for less than an hour each time. Is this realistic? You will probably have to negotiate with them to set some realistic rules. The adolescent will respond positively when you show that you respect them as someone learning to be an adult and that you are there to provide guidance and advice to them. One way to become better parents is to understand the needs and challenges that adolescents face.

### 2. Adopt an engaging parenting style

Dealing with an adolescent child requires parents to be more understanding towards the challenges of growing up. When your child uses the computer excessively,

it is important for you to be patient and to negotiate the appropriate length of play time with him, rather than totally denying him the use of computers or games. It is important for both parents to agree on a common approach so that a consistent message is sent to the child.

### 3. Pick your “battles”

While you understand and care for your child, you also need to set boundaries and limits. You need to make a stand on certain issues. However, it is important not to nitpick on everything that your child does. It is natural that you disagree to some of the things that your child does, but do consider whether such things are harmful to your child or are just manifestations of differences of opinions. Is it something against your family values? More importantly, is it necessary to fight this battle? Consider if doing so will bring more harm than good to your relationship with your child.

### 4. Look out for danger

It is important to keep track of what your child is doing and to keep a lookout for danger. At the same time, you would not want to be seen as being overly involved. Some parents check their children’s diaries or emails — this is not a good idea as the children can get very upset when they find out about this.

Be upfront with your child if you are going to check on his online activities. Your child needs his privacy. You may want to work out an agreement with him to place the computer in an open area such as the living room for easy monitoring of Internet use.

### 5. Set clear boundaries and realistic rules

Parents need to instil some responsibilities in our children. It is important to offer them clear limits as to what can be done and what are the out-of-bounds markers in the family. Rules set in the family have to be realistic. For example, it may be unrealistic to expect your child to stop online gaming within days. However, there must be consequences if he does not comply with the rules. Such rules have to be negotiated and jointly decided between you and your child. Once decided, the rules should be followed closely.

These skills form only part of a more comprehensive set of skills that is needed to help your child break free from his excessive Internet use or gaming. It may not work on the first few tries but do not give up hope. Continue to practise them and results will start to show. To learn more, ask your doctor to refer you to a family therapist.

## Crisis Management

As you are making changes to your parenting style, there may be occasions when such changes cause your child to react negatively. These negative reactions may come in the form of escalating aggressive behaviour in your child, or threats of self-harm or suicide. It would be dangerous to ignore these behaviours or threats.

### Aggressive Behaviours and Suicide Threats

#### Call the police

If there is a risk to you or your child's safety, you should call the police. The police can assist in such situations. At the same time, the presence of the police will indicate to the child that he is responsible for the consequences of his actions.

#### Bring your child to the Institute of Mental Health's (IMH) Emergency Services

You may want to consider sending your child to IMH's Emergency Services to be assessed by a doctor. Private ambulance services can be used for bringing your child to IMH since SCDF Ambulances are used mainly for "medical emergencies". You can call 1777 to arrange for a private ambulance service.



## Resources

Positive changes in behaviour take time. There will be ups and downs. Even the best suggestion sometimes may not work well as every situation is different. There is a need to make adjustments if a certain method does not work. Ideally, it will be better to discuss the situation with a professional counsellor who can work hand in hand with you for your child's recovery.

Parenting is a challenging journey and there is no one-size-fits-all solution to all parenting issues. We have covered some parenting principles and tips on helping your child manage his Internet use or gaming in this booklet. If you need further help, do contact the National Addictions Management Service (NAMS).

## Contact Us

General enquiries : 6389 2000  
Appointment : 6389 2200  
Email : [nams@imh.com.sg](mailto:nams@imh.com.sg)

All Addictions Helpline: 6-RECOVER (6-7326837)  
National Problem Gambling Helpline: 1800-6-668-668



**National Addictions Management Service (NAMS)**

Buangkok Green Medical Park  
10 Buangkok View, Block 9 Basement 1  
Singapore 539747

General Enquiries: 6732 6837

Appointment Line: 6732 6837

Email: [nams@imh.com.sg](mailto:nams@imh.com.sg)

All Addictions Helpline: 6-RECOVER (6-7326837)

National Problem Gambling Helpline: 1800-6-668-668

[www.nams.sg](http://www.nams.sg)

Apr 2017